

The Senate today cleared the way for an additional \$10.8 million for home heating assistance for about 27,000 Vermont households, Sens. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) and Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) announced.

With low temperatures forecast to fall into the teens this week in Vermont, the funding was included in a bill to keep the federal government running until March 4. Senators this morning voted 82 to 14 to end a Republican filibuster of the bill. Final Senate passage was expected later today.

Rep. Peter Welch (D-Vt.) said the House was poised to pass the same bill before Congress adjourns for the holidays.

Vermont and other states had faced the prospect of a 40 percent cut in the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), which helps senior citizens on fixed incomes, families with children and the disabled.

Sanders said, "At a time when heating oil prices are skyrocketing and temperatures are falling, this critically-important program will help insure that no one in Vermont goes cold this winter. During these very difficult times, seniors on fixed incomes and families with children shouldn't have to make the unacceptable choice between heating their homes and putting food on the table."

Leahy, a senior member of the Appropriations Committee which crafted the bill, said, "Topping up this essential program for the harsh winter weather has been a top priority in the final days of this session, and I am pleased that we are getting that job done. Home heat in wintertime is not a choice but a necessity, and this will mean relief for thousands of struggling Vermont households."

Welch said, "This program is a critical safety net for countless low-income families and seniors in Vermont. There is simply no excuse for failing to help Vermonters get through a cold, difficult winter during a time of such economic uncertainty."

Federal funding for the heating assistance program was nearly doubled in the last two years under a provision sponsored by Sanders. Leahy cosponsored that 2008 legislation and Welch sponsored companion legislation that year in the House.

So far this year, Vermont has received a total of \$14.8 million for LIHEAP, compared to the \$25.6 million in regular funding it received last year.

More than 27,000 Vermont households will receive benefits, up from 20,350 last year. Because the demand has increased but the amount available so far has decreased and the number of eligible households has expanded, the average benefit is being reduced from about \$1,100 last year to about \$660 this heating season.

After Congress doubled funding for home heating assistance in 2009, a record 8.3 million households nationwide received aid. This winter, as a result of the lingering recession, many more families are expected to need help keeping the heat turned on.